

REGIONAL SUMMARY

Upper Coastal Plain

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 21, 2024, by [ncIMPACT](#) and the [N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office](#).

Hosted by the [North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government](#).



INTRODUCTION:

This Focus Group

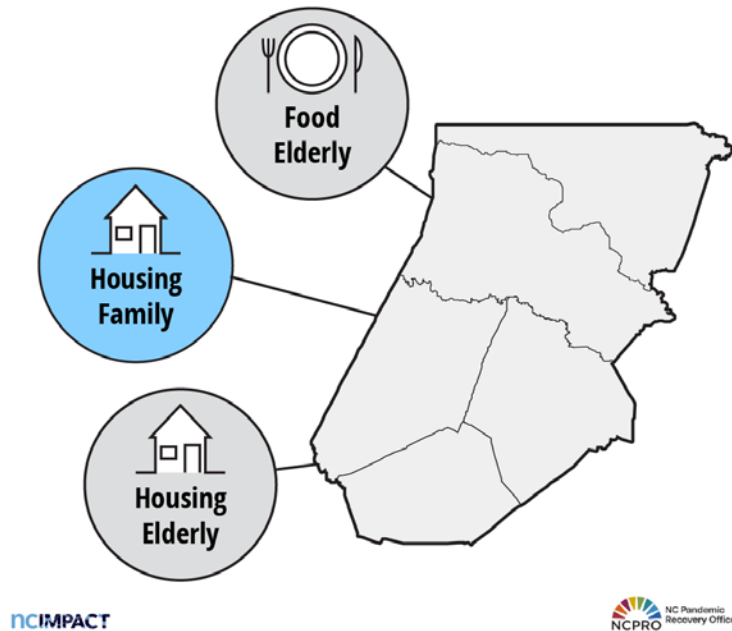
Ten people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. Many left their cameras off. The others appeared to be of traditional working age (between 24 and 65). The [Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments](#) (COG) represents Edgecombe, Halifax, Nash, Northampton, and Wilson counties. Two of the participants held roles with the COG. Four people were from Wilson County, three were from Nash County, and one was from Edgecombe County. One said they were from Nash and Edgecombe counties, and one said they represented Nash, Edgecombe, and Wilson counties. The participants worked in the local-government, non-profit, education, and private sectors.

The conversations were centered on the following three major questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants shared concerns about their communities' ability to meet people's needs after federal funding expires. The availability of adequate resources was a concern for all, but they expressed confidence in the region's ability to collaborate and respond effectively to local issues.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments Service Area



WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Participants largely agreed with the results presented in the CES.



Eldercare

One participant said that the support network for elderly citizens broke down during the pandemic because much of it is based on transportation or services that are available at senior centers. When those resources shut down, the elderly population was affected. Some participants observed that since the elderly population is predicted to grow in coming years, transportation and housing for them will likely be ongoing issues.

Pandemic funds helped provide services to the elderly when senior centers and public transportation were unavailable. The COG representative said that NCPRO and the American Rescue Plan Act (APRA) were especially beneficial. These funds allowed agencies to provide more in-home services to older people, including delivering sanitary supplies and meals.



Homelessness

Targeted funding to prevent homelessness was leveraged to keep people in their homes by paying for utilities and rent. However, the end of rental-assistance funding is a concern, because now rents have increased. One participant spoke of the challenges many face:

I know so many people that benefited from the rental assistance during the pandemic. . . . Also, when that assistance stopped a lot of their rents were sky high. They had increased so much. And even now I know several people that had to regroup, try to figure out . . . somewhere to live that is more reasonably priced. [They] are having the hardest times finding decent housing that is affordable, and they are working, they never stopped working, and they still have those issues.

Participants said that because housing is deeply interrelated to other issues and concerns, no single program can address it. Rental assistance and food programs filled great needs, but they didn't address the lack of access to high-speed Internet. Two participants elaborated on this:

Housing insecurity increased because people couldn't go to work. And with the schools closed down and the daycares closed down, even more people couldn't go to work. . . . The broadband became an issue because . . . some people could technically work remotely or maybe even do some side hustles remotely if they had better access to the broadband.

I agree with the mental health issues, too, because . . . some of these kids did not go to school at all, and they came to school in second grade, and they had missed . . . kindergarten, they had missed the first grade. So there was so much missing social interaction . . . I'm thankful for the education department giving us the money to hire the [CARES \[Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security\] Act](#) interventionists. . . . [The program] is ending this year. And I'm not very happy about it.



Communication and Collaboration

Multiple participants noted the importance of collaboration during the pandemic with other non-profits and community-based organizations to meet needs related to food insecurity and mental health.

One participant noted that communication was especially challenging since information was coming from a lot of different sources. People didn't know what was trustworthy and what was a scam. Some elderly folks received mailers about particular services, but if they were unable to access the Internet, they weren't able to confirm which were legitimate. Community-based efforts would have helped clarify confusion:

It's great to have a state approach, but what they lacked was more of a grassroots effort. . . . I think it could have been more effective if there had been a better grassroots effort.



Mental Health

Participants said that mental health was a top concern during the pandemic, noting that members of their communities still struggle with mental health issues and need better access to counseling and treatment:

I agree [that] the top three [issues are] food, housing, and transportation, but in our community, Nash and Edgecombe counties, [there are also] crime and mental health issues. I think those two [are] right up there with the other three.

We were able to leverage some mental health grant funding to provide counseling during that time frame as well to folks who were suffering from stress, anxiety, and some of the other mental health issues that people are continuing to deal with today.



Infrastructure

ARPA funds were used to make various infrastructure improvements. One entity was awarded a grant from the Department of Environmental Quality to improve its water tank and well.



Childcare

Participants noted that the lack of childcare has negatively impacted people's ability to work, especially women.



Broadband

Students had difficulty completing their schoolwork due to a lack of Internet access. Hotspots were distributed by the school system, but they often ended up being used by entire families due to their lack of Internet access:

Wilson County school system, they did a really good job of making sure that the kids had hotspots . . . that really was a saving grace for our students, all the way from elementary on up, to make sure that they had what they needed. But then you found parents were trying to use it as well. Everybody was trying to use the hotspot to get everything done that they needed.

The lack of access to high-speed Internet also affected seniors in the region. When there is only one Internet provider in a particular community, the fees are expensive:

We were doing a lot of printing for people. . . . Referring everybody [to] a website was just kind of a nightmare during that time when you had people trying to work from home, you know, kids trying to go to school from home. Broadband was not where it needed to be, at least not in our community.



Local Government Capacity and Response

As noted elsewhere, the ability to access information in a centralized location varied depending on the program. There was confusion. The necessity of utilizing existing infrastructure, such as the COG system, was discussed.



Transportation

Participants again noted that when transportation was reduced or halted during the pandemic, elderly people lost their connection to food access and community services:

I mean, [it] still operated at some level, but transportation is a big part of delivering food out to the populations in our regions.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Business-Specific Concerns

Overall, the group agreed with the main concern presented in the [2022 Employer Needs Survey](#) produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission: a lack of workers. They mentioned the region's lack of qualified workers and lack of access to capital.



Lack of Workers and Lack of Qualified Workers

Participants said that there seem to be more qualified workers than job openings and discussed the challenges job seekers are facing:

I've had a lot of my residents come in and tell me that they've applied for jobs . . . [and] a lot of them are university educated and they can't get hired. . . . They just want a job. . . . [T]hey may have more skills than [are] required and [employers] won't hire them because they're afraid that they'll leave.

They [applicants] don't have the . . . specific skill set that they're asking for, for that job, but . . . they've done other administrative work that they could be trained for. . . . There's been a lot of frustration for me hearing my residents come in and saying, "I'm applying. I'm applying. I'm interviewing," but then in the end, [the company is] not actually hiring people. . . . I don't know what to tell my residents about that . . . [since] they desperately want a job. . . . They may have come from this huge company and [now] they can't even get hired at McDonald's . . . because they're overqualified, but they just want to work somewhere and try and bring a paycheck in to help support their families.

Participants also noted that the lack of childcare means some people can't work. One participant mentioned that the service industry, in particular, is lacking workers.

There was strong agreement with this statement: "We need to [be] more active in the community. We need to get these businesses to be more active. More job fairs, free classes at the community college that offer some type of vocational skill."

MOVING FORWARD:**Understanding Resilience across the Region**

Participants were shown a [Social Vulnerability Index](#) of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They discussed the region's demographics and said that the young adults who are needed to fill some positions are just not moving to the area. Amenities need to be created that will incentivize young adults to move to—and remain in—the area.

Participants said that it will be difficult to provide the following services after their funding expires: some daycare services, housing assistance, some senior and health services, and enhanced transportation services.

Participants emphasized that, in addition to funding, partnerships are needed to address these challenges. One participant noted that employers in particular should take a larger role in addressing shortages:

Government can't solve everybody's problems. . . . We have to have partners. . . . We [the COG] administer the workforce program for the region . . . [and] businesses [say], "We need workers, we need this, we need that," but government funding can only go so far. And extra government funding eventually runs out, but the problems that I see everybody talking about throughout the region are pretty common: if a business wants workers, then they need to pay a wage [that allows] somebody [to] live here or commute or [they need to] help with some coordinated daycare. . . . They [business owners] have got to come to the table to help out with some of these issues . . . We've got to get business off the sidelines to come in and be a partner with us.

LESSONS LEARNED:**Preparing for the Next Crisis**

- 1. Centralized information hubs.** Participants hoped that moving forward there would be better ways to share information about available, legitimate services for citizens.
- 2. Communication and collaboration.** Participants said they were optimistic about moving forward together but were worried that when funding programs ended, they might not be able to meet the needs of their communities:

We need . . . state leadership to help bring people together. We need some coordinated state funding that's targeted to help us deliver coordinated services and eliminate some duplication to make these things more effective. . . . It's a combination of we need more tools and we need more partnerships.

Participants also said that they hoped to continue working together on these challenges and that the focus-group session was a good way to begin thinking about it.

- 3. Increase transportation access.** The group agreed with one participant who said that the region had very limited public transportation options, which is a workforce barrier:

I get calls all the time. Folks are asking us for help. Some company wants to hire . . . people, but it doesn't help if transportation is only getting there one day a week.